
City of Reading City Council

Public Hearing

PRD

Thursday, January 8, 2009

Council Chambers

5:00 p.m.

Vaughn D. Spencer, President of Council called the PRD Public Hearing to order.

Attendance

Council President Spencer
Councilor Fuhs
Councilor Goodman-Hinnershitz
Councilor Sterner
Councilor Baez
Councilor Waltman
City Clerk Linda Kelleher
City Solicitor C. Younger
City Planner A. Miller
C. Schmehl from URDC

Purpose

Council President Spencer announced that the purpose of the Public Hearing is in accordance with section 609 of the Municipality Planning Code (MPC) to obtain input on the proposed PRD amendment. He stated that the PRD zoning amendment is a proposed set of development regulations to control the possible future redevelopment of the southwest industrial area of the City – South of Penn Street along both sides of 2nd, under the Bingham Street Bridge, and along both sides of Canal Street extending east of South 7th Street.

Presentation by Administration

City Planner A. Miller introduced Charlie Schmehl from URDC, a consultant retained to prepare the PRD zoning amendment. Mr. Schmehl provided a summary of the proposed PRD which is an RR overlay district. He explained that this overlay district

will allow optional development that provides for residential, recreation, and retail uses within this primarily industrial area. He explained some of the overlay district provisions and noted that the change will move Canal Street to a pedestrian walkway and provide phased development opportunity.

Councilor Fuhs inquired about the need for a path running the entire length of the district. Mr. Schmehl stated that the Developer Record must provide a 10 foot wide path that is open to the public 18 hours per day on all parts of the land they control.

Councilor Fuhs inquired why Canal Street is being changed to a pedestrian walkway.

Mr. Schmehl explained that this decision was made using historical perspective and to encourage commercial pedestrian activity. He explained that the PRD requires a pedestrian oriented commercial street. He stated that sketches of the plan submitted by Giannasca were also reviewed.

Councilor Fuhs inquired why Mr. Schmehl would consider sketches of a proposed development rather than reaching a determination after consulting and discussing this change with City Officials.

Councilor Waltman noted the merits of the proposed PRD. He required what complications are present. Mr. Schmehl stated that the largest complications are the relocation of the sewage facility, the relocation of the UGI Distribution Facility, and the relocation of truck traffic.

Ms. Kelleher questioned the traffic language included in the PRD. She noted the reference to SALDO and noted that traffic requirements in the current SALDO created large problems in the Schuylkill Avenue area when the Berkshire Bottling Plant was under consideration.

Mr. Schmehl replied that the Planning Commission will consider traffic study results when considering the re-development plan.

Mr. Waltman agreed with the concerned expressed noting that traffic in this area is of high concern.

Councilor Sterner inquired how the zoning changes will work with in the flood plain area.

Mr. Schmehl replied that no changes are required. Mr. Miller stated that FEMA

reviewed the current floodplain and determined that the PRD will not affect development in the floodplain area.

Councilor Goodman-Hinnershitz inquired how this PRD amendment will interface with United Corrstacks. Mr. Schmehl stated the PRD provides a balancing act as the City does not want to harm existing businesses.

Councilor Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the potential problems for disrupting traffic from the east Reading area.

City Clerk Kelleher stated that three sets of comments were obtained from the County Planning Commission. The comments received in late September and December report that the County Planning Commission's comments in early September are not addressed. Ms. Kelleher stated that the Planning Commission's original comments contained twenty five issues and eighteen are left without response.

City Planner A. Miller stated that the Commission's suggestion to allow 10% of open land in the PRD area will not work due to the urban nature of the area. Mr. Miller stated that RACC was included to provide additional parking area.

Mr. Schmehl stated that numbers 9 and 11 are technical modifications that can be requested by the Planning Commission.

Councilor Waltman stated the current traffic study requirements listed in the SALDO are inadequate and led to traffic problems in the Schuylkill Avenue area when the Berkshire Bottling Plant Development was under consideration. Mr. Schmehl stated that the SALDO and PRD historically do not require methodology of traffic studies.

Mr. Waltman agreed with the need to further modify the traffic requirements. He requested that Mr. Schmehl and Mr. Miller provide a bullet response to all County Comments.

Public Comment

Councilor President Spencer reminded all of the comment rules.

Robert Behling -of Riverplace, thanked Council for considering the PRD.

Ernest Schlegel – of Pear Street, stated he supports the proposed PRD as it will enable the redevelopment of the area which will improve the City's tax base. He suggested that

Council also consider PRDs for other City areas as this change will improve employment and recreation opportunities. He expressed the belief that the proposed traffic issues will be created by those coming to visit the area not those who reside in the area.

Vincent Paolini – CEO of Riverfront Credit Union, 430 South 4th Street, stated that Riverfront Credit Union was formed in 1948 and has operated in their current location since 1980. He stated that Riverfront Credit Union completed expansion projects in 1990 and 2000. He stated that 25% of those using the credit union are City residents. He noted his overall support for the PRD as he believes the City is the nucleus of the County. He stated that Riverfront Credit Union would like to stay in their current location and expressed concern with the traffic changes this development could cause.

Council President Spencer stated that Council will be making a decision on the PRD amendment within 90 days from the hearing.

Councilor Sterner thanked those citizens who came to the hearing and for taking interest in the PRD amendment.

Council President Spencer inquired if anyone in the audience wanted to comment before the hearing is adjourned.

Mike Boylan – of Berks Packing, stated that he did not receive a notification of the hearing.

Ms. Kelleher stated that she received instruction and direction on the mailing list from City Planner Miller. She stated that three ads were also placed in the Reading Eagle. She stated that two notifications were mailed to Berks Packing.

Michael Feeney – also stated that his business received no notification and questioned the area notification was provided to.

Mr. Schmehl stated that notification is only required to properties inside the PRD zone.

Councilor Fuhs disagreed with that process as properties on the periphery of the area are also affected.

Councilor Fuhs and Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested that a second hearing be conducted after notification is provided to areas of the periphery of the PRD area.

Council President Spencer suggested discussing the need for a second hearing at another time. He again announced that Councils required to take action within 90 days from the date of this hearing.

Ms. Kelleher clarified that if a second hearing is held the 90 day clock will restart.

Chris Stowe – of United Corrstacks stated that his business did not receive notification. He questioned how the PRD will impact the operation of United Coorstack.

Councilor Fuhs expressed the belief that as a flawed process was used in the mailing of notifications a second hearing should be conducted.

Ms. Kelleher reminded all that when Council last discussed the PRD notification the body decided to use the approach suggested by Mr. Miller rather than the broader approach she suggested.

Councilor Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that the notification area should be expanded to a broader audience. She also suggested holding the hearing in the PRD area.

Council President Spencer stated that reaching out to an area beyond that required may be problematic. He stated that expanding the boundaries of that required opens the need to define the expanded notification area.

Ed Giannasca and William McShane approached the podium and noted their two years of work to get this project moved forward. Mr. Giannasca stated that the Giannasca Company wrote the PRD that was reviewed by Mr. Schmehl. He stated that additional delays will sink his project. He stated that lending for projects such as this and the nation's current financial crisis is difficult. Without the PRD this new redevelopment project will not move forward. He expressed the belief that this project is critical to Reading.

Mr. McShane expressed the belief that the notification process used was proper. He noted that he received a notice and many other colleagues also received notices. He requested that the project be advanced. He stated that many of the City population want to see the project move forward.

Councilor Waltman expressed the belief that a second hearing should be conducted as quickly as possible. Alicia Giannasca inquired how many hearings are necessary, noting that a second notification may not increase attendance.

James Burdge noted that additional opportunity for public comment is allowed with each planning phase of the development.

Ernest Schlegel suggested that City Staff make phone calls to each affected property owner. Councilor Fuhs agreed.

City Planner Miller explained that the Municipal Planning Code (MPC) requires notification to all properties within the PRD area 30 days before the hearing.

Councilor Fuhs referencing the admission that the Giannasca Group prepared the PRD reminded all of the flawed Master Developer Agreement prepared by Giannasca and presented by the Administration to Council on a Friday in June for Monday action. He expressed the belief that this push to move the PRD forward is just as flawed as the push to move the Master Development Agreement forward. He noted the repercussions that were avoided when Council refused to adopt the flawed Master Developer Agreement last June.

Councilor Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the need to educate the affected community.

Councilor Waltman note the need for Council to be comfortable with the process and the need for council to make a decision within a timely manner. He noted the need to insert good safe guards within the document.

Council President Spencer stated that City Council will further discuss a second hearing within the coming week.

The PRD Public Hearing was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by City Clerk Linda A. Kelleher